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ABSTRACT

Opting for curriculum design in the teaching of English which is based on recent psychological theory and current thought in logic, the author contrasts the more traditional chronological presentation with "process and structure" techniques. The weaknesses inherent in the idea of a curriculum patterned on the notion of having to "cover ground" in a certain predetermined period of time are examined. Teachers are urged to make their teaching more meaningful by viewing their educational objectives in terms of: (1) process, (2) structure, (3) concept development, (4) system interrelationships, and (5) thematic development. Three major principles relating to the development of concepts are included. Literary works and authors are cited to illustrate key ideas. (RL)

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The Idea of Coverage in the Teaching of Literature

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WE ARE ALL UNEASY about the ever-increasing amount of "literary material" that we think needs to be taught, given the explosion of knowledge, the supposed demand for studying world literature in the name of national survival, and creating courses for the gifted. To meet all these conditions we seem to continue to rely almost entirely on the method of coverage in one way or another: we speed up or crowd more in, or do both. In view of these conditions maybe we ought to try to clarify the concept of "covering ground," since we now put on it the burden of carrying nearly all curriculum change.

Of course the phrase is metaphorical. What in this figure of speech are the elements in the crossover from the known to the unknown? Is our coverage like that of a sprawling ivy? Or a tent? An engineer's survey? A map? Is it just a look-over, a view from a tower, or a jet view of the Great Lakes? Is it the recorded mileage of an automobile trip? An AAA briefing? Assuming that our "course" is from New York to Chicago, we could plan it for two days or for ten days or for two weeks, depending on what one wants to see. But in a curriculum we tend to let a *fixed* time — semester, hours, weeks, marking periods — determine purpose: Beowulf, the beginning; Frost, the destination, from September to June to do it all. Many curricula in various schools are arbitrarily marked off by mere time allotments: *Macbeth*, three weeks; *Return of the Native*, two weeks; Wordsworth, two days; Keats, one day; First World War poets, one day; "In Memoriam," "Crossing the Bar," and "The Lady of Shalott," one day. Seldom in all my years of working with English departments have the course-framers said: "These are the aims and purposes for teaching Wordsworth and, let us see, to do all these will require certain readings and these must be related; and this pattern must be put within the developing frame of romanticism; these tasks will take perhaps five days or so." Observe that as a rule coverage is usually pace-centered, the aims of the teaching and the ideas and values of the heritage "worked into" the alternating speeds of the coverage.

The Greeks who turned out well-educated youth in fair numbers did not resort to this kind of coverage; the medieval trivium did not rest on coverage; the British public schools like Eton or Winchester did not and still do not rely on coverage. Coverage, as survey or overview in a pre-stated time, it seems, is a twentieth-century American way of treating all pupils alike, all knowledge alike, a sort of moving belt presentation. It is an easy mode for hosts of unqualified teachers. (I often wonder why qualified teachers themselves submit to this speedhaunted course making.) It is, also, a text-prone method without much need for a school library. It is, above all, hostile to concept development.

What do we usually associate with coverage? Typically, the survey of British literature (practically unknown in the British secondary school!), the survey of American literature, and now an overview of world literature. One high school

met "the challenge of survival" neatly and with dispatch; it put world literature in the senior year, British literature in the junior year, pushing the American survey to the sophomore year. Coverage, thus, is a way of pressing through some huge sweep of material in an additive way, the flow of it unconceptualized; and calling each arbitrary section of the coverage a "unit" does not improve the logic of the undertaking.

Let us look at the coverage method in light of the present explosion of knowledge. What little knowledge, in comparison with our present accumulation, the humanist of the Renaissance had to survey! Think, by way of contrast, of the new classics since 1600! How many substantial works were created since my day in high school in the early 1920's — O'Neill, Joyce, Proust, Sartre, Camus, Shaw, and as late as 1926, Hemingway, Faulkner, and many very good poets and playwrights (as good as Gray and Goldsmith), and now a whole new paradigm of drama which we can hardly keep up with — Ionesco, Brecht, Beckett, Miller, Anouilh, to name a few. Imagine what another thirty years will bring! How can the method of coverage ever cope with it all? Will we merely compress and speed-up, cut snippets from more works for pupils to touch with the tip of the tongue to get a taste. Our courses are fast becoming a package of samplers.

A week ago a teacher complained to me that in her advanced placement class "they" (who is this mystical "they" that prods teachers to wrongdoing?) had so much to get through that there was no time left to pull together the ideas. She was willing to sacrifice the most precious part of learning, the establishing of relations, the structuring of ideas, to squeeze in a few more authors. If on the subject matter side we call this kind of thing coverage, on the psychological side it may be dubbed *stuffage*. Why do we persist in such forced marches across the literary terrain? Another told me that she can no longer take three weeks on the Romantics because "there's too much to do." In light of what aim in English is there ever "too much to do"? On what grounds are the Romantics to be curtailed? Are the Romantics becoming irrelevant? Is the term being developed elsewhere in school as well? Romanticism is a key concept in the analysis and interpretation of any work of art. In the name of what is it to be skimped and squeezed?[1]

Process and Structure

Now, the point I wish to stress is that coverage is incredibly entrenched in a day when the new research in psychology (process) and the new explorations in logic (structure) are incompatible with it. In an older day, course-making was all scope and sequence, and now it is becoming process and structure. Are they merely new labels for the same old thing? I think not. Another dimension goes along with process and structure, which to me is very insightful for English teaching — the idea of the *development* of thought, or, in psychology, *concept development*. The logical sequence of a planned curriculum is not the same as the genetic or progressive development of an idea *in* the pupils. Process and structure suggest the attainment and the formation of an idea or a generalization, from the initial act of discovery to the invention of a pattern or lattice of relations to hold it.

In the past few decades with the waning of behaviorism and the psychology of adjustment there has been a gradually increased delving into the nature of thinking, of creativity, of the formation

[1] In one school composition and grammar are taught in one semester, whereas in the second semester pupils rush along from "Beowulf" to *Lord of the Flies*, all in ninety days! In another school, accelerated pupils are required to read twenty books in addition to the daily snippets called homework.

and attainment of concepts; at the same time the new logic of Russell and Whitehead, the first modification of logic in 2000 years, revealed new ways of breaking down the processes of thought into identifiable strategies. Investigators like Piaget, Vigotsky, Bruner, Guilford, Welch; logicians like Blandshard, Morris, Carnap, Popper, Bridgman — all have opened new ways of exploring the act of thought. Nearly all these findings lie waiting for someone to translate into classroom teaching.

Development of Concepts

As one explores this research, what general principles of how concepts are best developed can be drawn from it? I should like to state a few of them and indicate how they may apply to the teaching of English literature, and how, above all, they challenge the additive, time-centered, item-strewn method of coverage.

1. *A concept is best developed by exploration and discovery (heuristics) rather than step-by-step direction and guidance (algorithmics) to a sure end.*

Most coverage, if it is to be done on time, must resort to providing the pupil with a bulk of material (readings) and at the same time a series of steps to follow that will lead the pupil through the literary material *on time*. The teacher or text sets up a list of "works," and informs the pupils when the goal is reached, or when it is no longer present, or when a new goal is replacing it. "We must now unfortunately leave the Romantics," the teacher says, "as time is of the essence, and go on to the Victorians." Unknown to the pupils the teacher has planned to do the Victorians in ten days, including a reading of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, a few sonnets from the Portugese, "Pippa Passes," "Prospice," and two dramatic monologues; then, too, there will be "Crossing the Bar," a small section from "In Memoriam," and probably "The Lady of Shalott," a light review of Dickens, a touch of Thackeray, a bit on the Rossettis, with perhaps a poem by Swinburne, if time permits. And a closing out of the area, probably, with "Dover Beach" and a brace of dark poems by Hardy. The three characteristics of the Victorian age will be stated, as well as the four main themes of Dickens' novels, the three qualities of Tennyson's poetry, and the four ingredients of the dramatic monologue. There is no logical structure within the coverage. Concepts like faith, skepticism, pessimism, optimism, science will be churned over again and again in discussions, but they will lie buried in the thicket-like coverage, all dwarfed and underdeveloped, all matted together. So it will go on — three characteristics of this, the four phases of that, authors to go with titles, quotations to be identified until, in months, comes Edith Sitwell or Virginia Wolfe, say, by June 10, and so time to stop.

In the language of information theory, we are here "processing" a vast amount of information by a finite number of simple routines. As for the pupils, psychologically, there is little room for discovery and, logically, little opportunity for practicing the invention of structure. Yet both of these are *necessary* to good thinking, so all the research tells us.

By *discovery*, I do not mean that the pupil help plan the course or select a project, as we say, or do something on his own as a term paper along the way. Discovery here means the participation in creating a tentative structure of the day-by-day ideas. Let's accept, for the illustration, our working within a conventional chronological frame. Suppose that at a given stage the pupils, after they had helped devise a web of relations called "Romanticism," were led away from early Romanticism by asking them to read a selected portion of "In Memoriam" (under your explication and annotation, of course) and to fit it into the concept Romanticism that they had just

taken several weeks to frame. They now face a problem: does this new poem start a new idea not entertained in the recently-made concept "Romanticism," or can it be incorporated into the structure of relations they have just finished? Discovery here means a trial-run, a tentative interpretation of what is taking place; a concept is progressively being built, and we do not know what the process will yield, what web of relatives the concept will *be*. Is the Victorian time-span another "feel" of the world or just a label culled from a ruller or a set of dates? How would the pupils come to know? What criteria would compel the choice? They would need "to run through" previous poems they had read under Romanticism, with this inquiry as guide, "Has death been treated quite this way before?" We will "check" with "Three Years She Grew," "Mutability," "When I Have Fears," "Ozymandias." All on death. What new notes are introduced? The pupils are now relating, that is, structuring, five poems on death. This involves the strategy of comparison, the forming of a generalization to contain them all, and then an individuation of "In Memoriam". Is it skepticism that marks this poem off from the others, yet a final return to faith? Did the Romantics doubt? As for the class, this interpretation is held awhile as they examine "Prospice," then "Dover Beach." What has been happening to the thinking of men in these later years that the early Romantics do not reveal? Why? Yet here, too, are "Crossing the Bar" and "Pippa Passes." In contrast here are Hardy's "Drummer Hodge," "The Man He Killed," and "Hap." By what logic? Do all these poems give us the right to delineate a new period, a new outlook? By what logic? The teacher, we see, is developing creatively, problematically, progressively, the concepts *optimism* and *pessimism* in relation to *faith*, these key ideas that recur again and again in any thinking about literature. These have become, in our Western world, tools of analysis for interpretation of literary works, even of our own lives.

Importance of Concepts

This procedure, you must be saying, takes time. Of course it does. But the recompense is that the pupil has a kit of key concepts, so to speak, that he can bring to bear like tools to interpret other literature, and besides he has a set of strategies of relating literary works. He knows what operations stand for relating, generalizing, negating, joining, abstracting. He has no baggage to jettison at the end of such a course, no memory to tax for the time being for an examination. What an indictment of us when recently a ninth-grade girl said to her mother, "I'm memorizing now like fury in order to forget it forever next week."

In an experiment sponsored by the United States Office of Education, we spent eight weeks developing the concept *nature* in a dozen classrooms; it took eighteen poems, five compositions, and hours of trial structuring of ideas before the pupils were aware of the complex web of relations that tentatively, for them, make up the concept. One teacher refused to come into the project because she thought it a waste of time. "I can teach nature in three days." Certainly, I can teach it in thirty minutes, too! Notice how time always dominates the concept "coverage" in a syllabus. "There is just too much to cover to get the pupils ready for college," the rationalization goes. Yet colleges everywhere have been pointing out for years that the chief trouble with freshman writing is not mechanics but the thinness of texture and the crude, inchoate ideas brought to the writing. All the skill in coherence and unity in the world, and a perfect matching of authors and titles, cannot sustain half-baked ideas about democracy, transcendentalism, sin, Puritanism, nature, progress, tragedy, and so on. Now no

pupil is going to interpret any work of art well if these concepts are not expanded in their many facets. The *Michigan English Teacher*, 1964, states under "Myth Exploded," "no college demands the reading or study of specific classics." Nor, may I add, do the College Board Examinations. A while ago an English professor said that his daughter in high school was learning about Grendel, the Venerable Bede, and Alfred, and he burst out with, "I wish they'd teach her to write a decent paragraph instead."

To sum up our first point: *a concept is best developed slowly and through the progressive development of meaning in time and must be arrived at through discovery.*

2. There is another principle of concept development emerging from recent research that we can apply to English teaching. *A concept is best developed as it serves to harmonize more and more cases. A concept is not the storing up of many cases.*

Newell, Shaw, and Simon write this about machine theory, "Complexity is to be distinguished sharply from amount of processing." We English teachers seldom think of the demands we make on pupils to process huge quantities of information daily. It is not unusual for pupils to encounter 25 poems and stories in a week, besides background for each work, and the summary coverage of the lives of five or more authors to boot. How does the pupil stow it away, process it, codify it for future use? There is no one to tell him. We overload the syllabus and let the dealing with it be the pupil's concern. How is he to retrieve it when needed; his *need* often being only that of spot identification or true and false checking, or quiz-kid, one-word answers. In truth, in our English courses we provide little, built-in future use for the storage, and so we must devise all kinds of academic tricks to go with coverage, to get around the problem of storage. We let pupils hold the information only until the quiz, after which they can safely dump it. We tell them in the guise of a review what they will be tested on. We let them know that the first part will not be in the big final. We give a number of isolated quizzes, none related to the other. Gardner Murphy writes, "Can we by any stretch of the imagination equate two teachers, one of whom instills a passion for collecting bits of information and the other who collects a few central, profoundly pivotal realities regarding the structure of the cosmos or of human life?"

With the flood of concepts in an English course in mind, let us reflect on his other passage, "Perhaps the mind which gluts itself indiscriminately upon thousands of facts is itself a mind which loves reality but little." When one contemplates the mass media with their thousands of instantaneous and kaleidoscopic, fifteen-minute jabs daily, and in addition an English class doing the very same thing daily, one wonders what kind of reality English presents to a pupil, particularly when, in the name of excellence, we dump more concepts than ever upon the bright pupil, all in shorter time. Brightness thus often becomes equated with quick retrieval. The creative youth is often at a disadvantage in a course for the gifted because he has little chance for harmonizing the ever-flowing information. Learning is not a storage problem so much as a retrieval problem: what can the student evoke from within to meet a new literary work?

3. Another principle of concept development coming out of the new logic may be put in this way: *A concept is best understood when it is sought within, or a place is discovered for it in, a pattern or structure.* The greatest logicians reiterate this truth about the nature of understanding ideas. At the risk of laboring the principle, let me offer a few of their quotations. Whitehead writes,

"The final real test entity is an organizing activity." Carnap says, "To be real in the science sense means to be an element of the system." Blanshard: "by understanding is meant apprehension in a system." And, finally, Vigotsky, "To us it seems obvious that a concept can become subject to consciousness and deliberate control only when it is part of a system." If these statements are true, why is there so little systematic structuring in literature courses and the pupil given so little opportunity to structure a number of literary works as they are presented serially to him day by day? "There is no entity that enjoys an isolated sufficiency", says Whitehead, yet we treat author after author, work after work, as if each does enjoy such sufficiency. Each work has its personal, organic, existential impact, to be sure, and we may wish to learn the magic or the mystery of what in it calls up our response to it; yet to interpret this impact more fully one must go outside to other impacts of other works. It is here where most instruction in literature is weak. We seldom provide practice in structuring several literary works in relation to a proposed principle.

II

What larger interpretation of coverage in English can be made in light of these principles of concept development? First, information theory suggests that we are hurling at the pupil, even the brightest pupil, more literature in any one year than he can store away and retrieve. Second, even if we were to cut down on the sheer amount of material, learning for future retrieval in another situation would still depend on the discovery and the invention of structure, that is, on thematic strands.

Notice that the acknowledged great histories of American literature (surveys, if you please) are organized in respect to a thesis, a point of view, about which all the other issues cluster and are subordinated. No survey, I maintain, can be great if written in any other way; there is no "straight history" of literature. This is not the place to analyze this statement fully, but let's give examples of what I mean. Parrington follows the rise of coonskin democracy; Lewishohn traces the decline of the genteel tradition; Hicks, economically oriented, points up the rise of the working class; Van Wyck Brooks presents the peculiar New England mind and its decline; D. H. Lawrence stresses the intuitive, life force as norm; Hassam makes use of "radical innocence." In horrid contrast, our text-surveys are mostly compendiums, with a crude division into "periods," leaving no fundamental American concepts well delineated, no themes developed.

The alternative to this situation is to write a syllabus centering in several large themes or concepts which are basic to an understanding of American values. The first might be the Puritan tradition, which could be structured as a study of the universal but existential tension between the conforming code that holds a community together and the spontaneity of self-development, which could be studied in *The Scarlet Letter* and in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Here is a universal problem particularized in a section of America. Pupils would be invited to discuss the shift over the decades from guilt morality to fun morality in our country. Today, what code *is* legitimate, what bounds to moral freedom are available and desirable?

Another such theme might be "man and nature." There was, of course, much nature poetry long before America was discovered, in ancient Greece, in England, from which American nature poetry is largely derived. But the unique circumstance of a virgin continent confronting highly civilized man is peculiarly a part of the American consciousness. This impact deserves to be well explored. Again, today, the decline of this trans-

cendent view before megalopoly and technology surely needs examination. The once-felt intimacy of man and the universe, now waning, could be got at through Emerson and through *Moby Dick*.

Americans have been preoccupied with success. We might ask *why*, and study the motif in *Sister Carrie*, *What Makes Sammy Run*, *Silas Lapham*, and many others. The idea of authority within freedom has plagued Americans because of our laissez-faire democracy. Such works as *Billy Budd*, *The Sea Wolf*, *John Brown's Body* are offered as manifestations of this concern, with the lawless West as a main part of this study of authority in a democracy.

Breaking With Chronology

For those who have not the courage or skill to break at once from the item-by-item chronological coverage, I propose that three or four concepts be used throughout the "survey" like continually recurring strands to give some logical order and structure to the course. (I certainly do not mean those time charts with dates, authors, works, events listed vertically in columns, which always remind me of rows of hooks in a cloak room, and serve about the same temporary purpose.)

There was a time when I traumatically broke with coverage by beginning with Washington Irving and the place of myth, legend, and dream in a nation's existence, a mode of housing its highest values. Knowing that in the eighth grade the pupils had been introduced to myths and legends, I merely recalled those that developed on our soil, the legend of the West that still goes strong ("Shane," "High Noon"), and the proud Indian as in *Hiawatha*, the myth of the pristine, natural man in Cooper, and the legend of the "sturdy" pioneers (*Giants in the Earth*), the Horatio Alger legend, and above all the American dream, and Whitman's expansion of it. Later, I pointed out how the dream seemed to flounder; how Upton Sinclair and Ida Tarbell caused us to see that the morality of the dream and the politics of the dream clashed; then in the depression Benét's attempt to hold it before us in *Western Star*. Today, we may ask, is the dream dead as so many of our poets seem to say or is it being transformed, and if so, in what direction? This is what I mean by following a strand through time to hold a survey together. The teacher, of course, must deliberately endeavor to create in the pupil the personal, emotional response to a work, yet at other times to have the pupil rigorously pursue, and then erect a thought-structure to contain the continuing theme. T. S. Eliot states this aspect of teaching beautifully: "If in literary criticism, we place all emphasis upon *understanding*, we are in danger of slipping from understanding to mere explanation. We are in danger even of pursuing criticism as if it was a science, which it never can be. If, on the other hand, we over-emphasize enjoyment, we fall into the subjective and impressionistic, and our enjoyment will profit us no more than mere amusement and pastime."

I would be bold enough to say that, with a concept kind of treatment, a full third of literature in the courses of the last three years of high school could be tossed overboard, and we would do our task much better. I propose that this drastic deletion would allow us to make composition central, more of a humanistic study. Rightfully we have lamented the lack of time to assign and grade enough themes, to give the necessary personal conferences. In one respect, though, we are to blame. We teachers have continually added more and more literature and thus pressed down on composition in a hurried, often perfunctory way, or as an adjunct to literature.

Another way to save time for composition, when coverage of literature in the

last two years is a problem, is to take the minor writers of American literature and even some of the minor works of the major ones and put them into the seventh and eighth grades or even omit them altogether. I see little reason for allowing the poetry of Lowell, Whittier, and Holmes, and most of Longfellow and Bryant, to clutter up the junior year as they do now, for these are not first-rate poets anyway. A reappraisal of these authors has been going on for some time among literary critics, yet it has hardly affected the content of our English texts and syllabuses, which are shockingly and painfully outmoded and conventional. What I am objecting to is the inclusion of these for no other reason than coverage. There is always, of course, the Battle of the Books, old and new, but there is very little to war about when a half dozen contemporary poets far surpass the authors I have just listed. In many schools, much British literature could be dispensed with, because what passes for literature is mostly a study about it, often through uninspiring extracts: half a nip of *The Fairy Queen*, a third of the first book of *Paradise Lost* to show "how it goes," a leaf of *The Deserted Village*, a touch of the Pre-Raphaelites, a hint of Blake, a paragraph on *Prometheus Unbound* without reading any of the poem. This sort of thing is not getting anybody ready for life or for college, or for good writing or good reading. Why not transfer this misspent energy to the teaching of composition? Modern logic and contemporary research in concept development condemn this kind of covering the heritage as senseless.

Everywhere the humanities lament their decline, but if this sort of coverage in English be the best we can do, then English literature does not deserve to be a dominant study. The prevalent touch-and-go survey does not lead to understanding, nor help the pupil toward this from W. H. Auden,

> Yes, these are the dog days, Fortunatus...
> And out of the open sky
> The pantocratic riddle breaks—
> "What are you and why?"

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